

Beneath its snowy mantle cold and clean,
The unborn grass lies waiting for its coat to turn to green.
The snowbird sings the song he always sings,
And speaks to me of flowers that will bloom again in spring.

Although joyous Christmas music fills the airwaves, the above lyrics from a non-Christmas song, aptly describe what I'm presently feeling. With cold and snow everywhere, I can only dream of what will be.

One might recall these lyrics from a song titled *Snowbird*. The song was made popular in the early seventies by recording artist Anne Murray.

The word snowbird is often used to describe those lucky individuals who fly the coop, those who head south to escape the cold winter weather. My brother Ruben and his wife Lisa are prime examples. For years they lived in Minnesota. Whenever I'd call them on the phone, I'd jokingly say, "Greetings from sunny, warm Nebraska. How are things up there, in the Great White North?"

Recently, they moved to Texas and now the joke is on me. For the past two weeks, we Nebraskans have been locked into what closely resembles the Great White North. Our only bragging right will be, "It's going to be a White Christmas."

Ice, snow and cold weather can be difficult for humans, but most often they are an inconvenience. For many creatures, including birds, such conditions can be life threatening.



We often assume that most birds, like Brother Ruben, have flown the coop and headed south for the winter; but some, like the cardinal, remain behind. This year-round resident with its spectacular red color epitomizes the Christmas season. It is said the bird's scarlet

plumage represents the blood of Christ shed for human redemption, making the bird a symbol of Christmas.

Like the lyrics in the song *Snowbird*, catching a glimpse of this brilliant red bird or hearing its song on a snowy, cold, gray winter's day brings cheer and inspiration, a reminder that flowers will return once again in the spring.

Carolus Linnaeus, the famous Swedish botanist, named the cardinal. The bird's scarlet red plumage reminded him of the red robes worn by the cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church.

Cardinals, songbirds native to North and Central America, can be found in woodlands, brushy undergrowth, and gardens. The cardinal is a member of the finch family. Its diet consists of grains, seeds, fruit, berries and insects.

The male cardinal, slightly larger than the female, is a brilliant, scarlet-red with a large crest on its head. It has a black face and a red bill. The female, also crested with a red bill, is mostly grayish-tan in color with a hint of red on her wings and tail.

The cardinal's song is a distinctive, cheerful sound; a series of repeated chants sounding like *whoit-whoit-whoit* — *kew-kew-kew*. Both males and females sing the same song. This delightful chant is most often heard in the spring of the year when one is calling out for a mate. Frequently, I imitate their call. It's a challenge to see how closely I can draw one near. What a disappointment it must be for the bird when it discovers I have been whistling.

Now that a snowy mantle, cold and clean covers the landscape, conditions can be deadly for cardinals. Ice covering seeds and berries prevents them from eating. If the ice remains for three or more days, cardinals could starve. Bird feeders are often their only source of food. At this time of year, one should fill feeders with bird food high in fat content — such as suet, sunflower seeds, safflower, millet, and peanuts. One can purchase bird seed formulations designed especially for cardinals.

Although the beautiful Christmas cardinal remains behind to bring us cheer and joy, I only wish it could be like that of the *Snowbird*,

Spread your tiny wings and fly away
And take the snow back with you where it came from on that day.

Perhaps, it could take the snow to Minnesota, or better yet, how about to Texas.

Wishing you and yours a Merry Christmas!

